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A collaborative project of
MICHIGAN LEAGUE FOR
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Right Start in MI: Births to teens down, unwed births up *Babies at higher risk of growing up in poverty, Kids Count study finds*

LANSING -- While fewer teens are giving birth in Michigan, the percent of babies born to unmarried women has risen dramatically, putting their children at higher risk of poverty, a new Kids Count in Michigan report concludes.

[Right Start in Michigan and Its Counties – 2011](#), released today, looks at Michigan births from 2000 to 2009 and ranks counties based on six key measures of health. Houghton County in the Upper Peninsula had the lowest health risk for babies while Alcona County in the northeast Lower Peninsula had the highest risk.

“These are important trends to track as we seek to revitalize our economy,” said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan project director at the Michigan League for Human Services. “One troubling area that could impact our future workforce is the large jump – 20 percent -- in births to unmarried women. Women who are not married at birth of their child are likely to remain single and their children are much more likely to live in poverty.”

About 40 percent of all births in Michigan in 2009 were to unmarried women (up from 34 percent in 2000). Most startling, is that two out of every three births to women in their early 20s were to single mothers.

“Moms who were single at the time of birth are much less likely to receive child support than married women and more likely to struggle financially,” Zehnder-Merrell said.

About half of all births were to mothers eligible for Medicaid, the state and federal health insurance program for low-income people. Pregnant women in households earning less than 185 percent of poverty (about \$27,000 or less a year for a single woman) without health insurance are eligible.

Michigan does better than the nation in having a lower percentage of mothers without a high school education (only 17 percent did not have a diploma or GED) and mothers who received late or no prenatal care. It fares poorly, however, in comparison to other states on two key measures: babies born too small or too soon, ranking 36th and 31st among the states.

Three of five indicators where a trend could be calculated over the decade showed improvement while the other two declined. In addition to the nonmarital birth trend, they are:

- A 13 percent drop in teen moms who have a second baby
- Declines in births to teens and preterm births
- Babies born weighing less than 5.5 pounds rose slightly

A bright spot in the report was improvement in three of five measures for African American mothers and babies, though large disparities still persist. Research has shown early disparities affect early development, school readiness, academic achievement and lifelong potential.

Among policy implications in the report is the need for:

- More robust family support services
- Better access to women's health care services
- Expanded family planning
- Stronger access to Medicaid services through improved provider rates
- A state focus on improving maternal and child health in communities of color

"Michigan leaders are focused on creating a better business climate in Michigan by cutting taxes. This report reminds us that part of a better business climate is investing in our children. We need to make sure they have the right start in life so they can become productive members of society," said the League's Policy Director Karen Holcomb-Merrill.

Resources for reporters: Please visit www.kidscount.org/datacenter for more data or to create charts on trend information. A conference call with Jane Zehnder-Merrell will be held at **10 a.m. today, (Wednesday)**. Please call **1-866-210-1669 and enter 4385678#**. Individual interviews can also be arranged by calling (517) 487-5436.

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